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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 PRISTINA 000756

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DEPT FOR DRL, INL, AND EUR/SCE, NSC FOR BRAUN, USUN FOR  
DREW SCHUFLETOWSKI, USOSCE FOR STEVE STEGER

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SUBJECT: KOSOVO: K-ALBANIAN PARTIES PREPARE FOR ELECTIONS;  
POST-ELECTION COALITION PROSPECTS STILL MURKY

Classified By: COM TINA KAIDANOW FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The six Kosovar Albanian political parties with a realistic chance of passing the five-percent parliamentary threshold are scrambling to prepare for the coming election campaign, which formally begins on October ¶26. The Democratic League of Kosovo (LDK) hopes to remain the largest party but is struggling to overcome the challenges of incumbency and tailor its message for the first post-Rugova election. Junior coalition partner the Alliance for the Future of Kosovo (AAK) is trying to stay afloat despite party leader Ramush Haradinaj's absence to stand trial in The Hague and funding shortages caused by the need to pay for his defense. The main opposition parties -- especially the Democratic Party of Kosovo (PDK) -- are developing detailed campaign platforms and pledging to run positive campaigns based on their economic and other proposals. Meanwhile, the new parties -- Nexhat Daci's Democratic League of Dardania (LDD) and Bexhet Pacolli's New Kosovo Alliance (AKR) -- are trying to differentiate themselves from others and to clear the threshold to enter parliament. In an uncertain political environment, all parties appear to be keeping their post-election coalition options open, which augurs well for the civility of the campaign but does not necessarily mean an easy or tumult-free coalition building process once the election outcomes are known. END SUMMARY.

LDK Struggles With Incumbency, Post-Rugova World

¶2. (C) In separate meetings on October 17, LDK Presidential advisor Naim Jerliu and adviser to the Deputy Prime Minister Izet Sadiku told poloff that the LDK faces the disadvantages of incumbency without many of the advantages. They complained that the party has been the larger member of the governing coalition but -- because the AAK has held the prime ministership and because Kosovo institutions do not have authority over some key issues -- the LDK may be blamed by voters for having failed to do things it was not in a position to accomplish. Both expressed hope that the departure from the LDK of its offshoot party, the LDD, and autocratic LDD leader Nexhat Daci, will benefit the LDK in the long run by ridding the party of corruption and cleaning up its image. But Sadiku admitted that the split with the

LDD, the death of party founder and President Ibrahim Rugova in 2006, and the challenges of incumbency could leave the LDK with less support than in previous elections. Asked about the party's election strategy, Sadiku emphasized the LDK's "return to its original values" and selection of "honest" and "intellectual" new candidates, especially at the municipal level, where the party has kept only a few incumbent mayors on its ticket. Both Sadiku and Jerliu acknowledged that the LDK would need to address voters' future concerns rather than merely stressing final status and its heritage as the "party of Rugova," but gave little indication of a plan for doing so. LDK campaign billboards prominently feature Rugova and the slogan "On the Right Path."

¶3. (C) Jerliu and Sadiku both said they expected the LDK to remain the largest party, though Sadiku acknowledged that it was likely to be so by only a narrow margin. Both insisted the LDK would field its own candidate for Prime Minister, to give the LDK a chance to govern and end the "privileging of small parties" that gave the much-smaller AAK the key role in government. (The nomination of a prime ministerial candidate is still a matter of some dispute within the party, with some acknowledging that the LDK lacks a strong figure and could harm itself by nominating the wrong person.) Speculating on possible coalition partners, Jerliu suggested the (mathematically unlikely) option of a majority coalition between the LDK and Serb and other minority parties. Sadiku said that in his opinion a coalition with the PDK, even with Thaci as Prime Minister, would be the best option. This ambivalence is reflected widely in the party, with some LDK luminaries willing to consider a "grand coalition" with the PDK and others far less inclined to let bygones be bygones, even if Kosovo status demands a unified political approach.

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(Comment: Key to the LDK's coalition-building strategy will likely be the electoral strength of smaller parties including the AAK; if AAK garners a significant percentage of the vote -- hard to assess at this stage -- the temptation will grow within LDK to avoid a costly coalition arrangement with PDK.)

AAK Running Hard to Stay in Place

¶4. (C) In separate meetings on October 17 and 18, AAK Deputy President and Assembly Presidency member Naim Maloku and Assembly caucus leader Gjylnaz Sylja told poloffs that the AAK will face a difficult campaign with Ramush Haradinaj absent and the party strapped for cash after it (and, by implication, much of its donor base) has had to fund Haradinaj's multimillion-euro war crimes defense in The Hague. Maloku said the party's strategy focuses on having its key leaders campaign in their home regions, where they are trying to drum up support through friends and family connections, and where some were funding their own campaigns. Sylja noted that the AAK would rely heavily on door-to-door and other low-budget campaigning. (While Haradinaj's defense has undoubtedly been a hardship for AAK fundraising efforts, the ubiquitous "With Ramush" and new "With the Prime Minister" billboards suggest that the party still has some available funds.) Maloku claimed the AAK expected to win 10 or 11 percent of the vote, but not more. Turning to post-election politics, Maloku said the AAK wants Haradinaj to return as Prime Minister, and implied that the party will be flexible in its choice of coalition partners. Interestingly, we have heard that clandestine approaches have been made by PDK and its party leader, Hashim Thaci, to the AAK, long arch-rivals for the affections of former KLA supporters. AAK's position -- cautious but not outright hostile -- has been to wait for the outcome of the vote and calculate options on that basis.

PDK Prepared With Detailed Program

¶5. (C) PDK officials Bajram Rexhepi, Enver Hoxhaj, Flora Brovina, and Hajredin Kuci told poloffs in separate meetings that the PDK plans to avoid negative campaigning and will

instead stress its proposals for addressing concrete issues of concern to citizens. Rexhepi noted that the party will focus on rule of law, economic reform, energy, education, and health care, and said the party had taken care to remove "old communist-style thinkers" to sharpen its focus on privatization and economic reform. Hoxhaj, the party's point man for education and a knowledgeable observer of economic policy, gave poloff a detailed readout of the party's specific proposals on reforming the tax structure to encourage domestic production, retooling the education system to generate a workforce with the most marketable skills, and other issues. Already looking ahead to appointments, Kuci floated the idea of a PDK government putting the Ministry of Justice, rather than the Ministry of Agriculture, under Serb leadership and making Serbian List for Kosovo and Metohija (SLKM) MP Dragisa Krstovic Justice Minister. Well-known and often controversial figure Edita Tahiri, who joined the PDK's election list along with her Democratic Alternative of Kosovo (ADK) party, told poloffs separately that she allied with the PDK because she was impressed with its "center-right" economic reform plans and Thaci's statement to her that he would choose whichever coalition partner and appointees receive U.S. and EU support.

¶6. (C) PDK leaders have not publicly stated their coalition preferences, but Rexhepi echoed to poloff what has been patently obvious for months: that the party's first choice would be a coalition with the LDK, giving Hashim Thaci the undisputed shot at the prime ministership. Rexhepi -- loyally following the party line -- observed that relations between the parties had improved considerably since the bitter postwar period (and even further with the leadership succession in the LDK) and was optimistic a coalition could work. Flora Brovina likewise observed that the LDK would be the best coalition partner, since it was comparatively uncorrupt relative to the LDD or AAK. In the past week,

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numerous PDK billboards have gone up around Kosovo, prominently featuring PDK leader Hashim Thaci and the slogan "Proud of Kosovo."

#### ORA Pledges Positive Campaign

¶7. (C) Like the PDK, ORA Deputy President Ylber Hysa told poloff on October 17 that ORA intended to run a "positive" campaign focused on economic and social issues rather than on Kosovo's final status or on criticizing the government. He estimated that the party would receive 9 or 10 percent of the vote (we think that's a vast overestimate; ORA may struggle to even reach the 5 percent threshold for Albanian parties), but declined to speculate on preferred coalition partners, instead noting that the party could see itself either in government or in opposition, depending on available options. Building on its traditional base of younger voters, ORA has begun sponsoring rock concerts around Kosovo. (Comment: Entirely shameless, ORA posters around Kosovo feature ORA leader Veton Surroi shaking hands with President Bush. The photo was taken from a meeting earlier this year in Prague between President Bush and democratic activists from around the world. End Comment.)

#### LDD Stresses Appeal of Individual Candidates

¶8. (C) LDD General Secretary Lulzim Zeneli told poloff on October 16 that the party was relying on voters' trust in its candidates, since voters' "Balkan mentality" disposed them to look at specific candidates rather than parties. LDD leaders are counting on voters' confidence in their "sincerity," which they plan to bolster by not making promises they cannot keep, such as specific dates for Kosovo's independence. (Zeneli gave no sign of concern that party chairman Daci's role in past corruption scandals might affect voters' trust in the LDD's candidates.) Zeneli noted that the LDD's strong women's forum and youth forum would help its campaign prospects. The LDD also plans some large rallies and

additional smaller, more informal meetings. Zeneli observed -- and we agree -- that LDD has particularly good prospects in municipal elections in some areas of eastern Kosovo, and that the party's coalition with the Albanian Christian Democratic Party (PSHDK) would help it in Klina and Gjakova. Asked about post-election coalition prospects, Zeneli argued that "the era of big parties" is over and that several parties would be necessary to form a majority coalition, so the LDD would evaluate its options after the election. Perhaps reflecting its strong diaspora ties, LDD has a slick website with frequent election-related updates. Unlike the other parties, as of October 24 LDD did not appear to have any campaign billboards up around town.

#### AKR Emphasizes Economic Policy and Pacolli

¶9. (C) At a meeting with poloffs on October 18, AKR Deputy Presidents Ibrahim Gashi and Fadil Maloku and Women's Forum head Rita Hazeraaj said the AKR is a "liberal democratic party" focused on economic policy. They criticized the established parties' focus on Kosovo's status to the exclusion of post-status issues, noting that "Kosovo needs not only independence, but also independence from poverty." (Note: This is Pacolli's stump speech, and his ubiquitous TV and billboard ads are about jobs, jobs and more jobs. His party also has the most visible presence on the ground, with offices even in remote communities.) AKR officials detailed the party's tax and economic reform plans, including efforts to create jobs through improved agricultural productivity and an improved climate for small businesses. They noted their support for regional economic cooperation, including on energy issues, and stressed the need for foreign investment, especially by the U.S. They also claimed to support instituting a U.S.-style presidential system, including direct election of the president.

¶10. (C) Gashi and Maloku told poloffs that the AKR would only join a coalition if other parties would accept its platform, so was unlikely to join a coalition led by another

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party. In an implicit recognition that an AKR-led coalition is unlikely to result from this election, the AKR leaders said they regarded Kosovo politics as "a marathon, not a sprint" and that they would use a role in opposition or in power at the municipal level to gain support for their policies in preparation for future elections. Maloku acknowledged that the party recognizes it is viewed with suspicion by other parties and some members of the public due to party leader Pacolli's prior experience working on construction projects for Russian authorities, and said he had advised Pacolli to "never mention Russia again" in his public comments. (Comments by leaders of other parties this week suggest the AKR leaders' concerns about the party's image are valid. Officials of the LDK, PDK, and ADK all brought up the AKR as an example of a party with which they would be reluctant to seek a coalition because of suspicion about Pacolli's prior connections. Pacolli's image has also been damaged in the aftermath of the recent murder of KPS officer Triumf Riza, with much popular speculation regarding Pacolli's alleged ties to suspected mobster Enver Sekiraga, thought to be involved in the murder. END COMMENT.)

¶11. (C) COMMENT: Boastful predictions and doubtful projections aside, it appears that most of the parties have a realistic understanding of their chances in these elections and are keen to keep their options open for post-election coalition making. That augurs well for both the civility of the election campaign itself and the behavior of key leaders as part of the continuing Unity Team effort. Still, the coalition-building process after elections is bound to be contentious and sensitive. Much will depend on the performance of the parties, which is almost impossible to predict accurately in Kosovo, with the heavy influence of clan leaders and parties' geographic ties playing a large role in determining outcomes. We would be rash to make our

own predictions, or to give too much credence to the polls that favor one party or another; rather, we should be prepared to urge that Kosovo's leaders act responsibly and quickly in the wake of elections to form a government that reflects the larger interests of the status process and Kosovo's Ahtisaari commitments. We will continue to follow developments and prompt all sides to remember their pledge to conduct themselves with restraint throughout the campaign.  
End comment.

KAIDANOW